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Sooty Shearwater *Puffinus griseus*: a new species for eastern Africa

Colin Jackson & Simon Valle

On Sunday 30 May 2004, SV found the corpse of a seabird on the beach in front of the Mwamba Bird Observatory and Field Study Centre, Watamu. The specimen was identified as a shearwater from a combination of its dark black-brown colour, size, long narrow wings and long, slender 'tube nose'. A full description was taken along with various measurements which indicated that this species was a Sooty Shearwater *Puffinus griseus*, a first record for eastern African waters.

Description

Upperparts: The flesh of the head and neck had been eaten away to the bone leaving just a tuft of dark blackish feathers on the forehead. Mantle, scapulars, back and rump mainly dark grey-black with some pale patches formed by the tips of very worn back and scapular feathers.

Upperwing: Rather uniform dark brown-black, with outer primaries somewhat browner due to significant wear, particularly at the tips. Primaries p9 and p10 (numbered ascendantly) were new and p8 at stage '4' of moult (after Ginn & Melville 1983). These three primaries were black-based in colour with a silvery-grey 'wash' towards the centre and contrasted strongly with the old, very worn and brown primaries p1–p7. All secondaries old and worn.

Tail: Slightly rounded. Tail colour grey-black, the 'grey' due to wear, with the outer feathers worn almost to the point of being white, though darker where protected by the uppertail coverts. Underside of tail slightly greyer than above and almost completely covered by the long under tail coverts.

Underparts: Breast and belly ashy grey, very slightly darker on the flanks and darkening more significantly on the lower belly, crissum and under tail coverts. Feathers very worn with pale tips and some quite brown in colour, giving the underparts a slightly mottled appearance.

Underwing: The inner lesser and median coverts were a dark, smoky grey with the first few inner greater coverts being a lighter grey. The lesser coverts up to the carpal joint were mid brown-grey with worn, paler edges and dark shafts. The proximal median coverts were pale grey with a tinge of yellow - possibly from contamination - fading to almost pure white at the carpal joint and merging with white lower primary coverts to form a distinctive

silvery-white panel. The greater coverts were light grey, though darker than the median coverts, forming a dark trailing edge adjacent to the white panel. Upper primary coverts large and creamy white with darker grey bases and dark shafts overlaying pale grey outer primary coverts. The under surface of the old primaries was light grey, clearly darker than the white coverts and giving the wing a dark tip and trailing edge along the 'hand'. The new primaries were also grey but clearly darker than the adjacent old ones.

Bare parts: Bill long, slender, uniformly black. Feet with dark blackish outer toes, mid grey inner toes with a tinge of pink and paler webbing. Feet (including the claws) projected beyond the tail tip by 32 mm. Tarsus clearly two-toned with inner edge pale grey and outer edge dark slate grey. Claws black.

Measurements: Wing = 305 mm (straightened, flattened chord measurement, though note the primaries were abraded); head (bill + skull) = 100.7 mm; tarsus (centre of tibio-tarsal joint to first scale of tarsus above wrist joint) = 61.4 mm; bill (upper culmen to feathering) = 42.5 mm; toe plus claw (to back of folded 'wrist') = 73.5 mm; toe plus claw (to end of toe bone) = 70.3 mm; tail= 85 mm; body length = 46 mm; wing span = 1020 mm.

Age: Given the extremely worn plumage of the bird and that the breeding season of this species extends up to May, it is safe to assume that this was an adult bird. A young bird would still be in fresh plumage by this date.

Discussion

Wedge-tailed *Puffinus pacificus* and Flesh-footed Shearwaters *P. carneipes* are two all-dark shearwaters found in eastern African waters. Flesh-footed Shearwater has a pale horn bill with black tip and pink feet and Wedge-tailed Shearwater has a long tail which extends beyond the pale flesh-white feet; and neither species has a white underwing. Audubon's Shearwater *P. lherminieri*, the commonest shearwater in eastern African waters, does have a white underwing, but it is a purer white and this colour extends onto the belly. Audubon's Shearwater is also a much smaller species. Both Short-tailed *P. tenuirostris* and Sooty Shearwater show a pale underwing. Short-tailed Shearwater, however, has a pale grey underwing as opposed to white, a greyer head and a shorter bill. By contrast, the current specimen showed a dark blackish tuft of feathers on the forehead (not grey), strong white underwings and a long bill. According to Harrison (1983) Short-tailed Shearwater is up to 43 cm in length with a wing span of up to 100 cm, somewhat smaller than this specimen (46 cm and 102 cm respectively).

Sooty Shearwaters breed off the southern tip of South America with a few small colonies off south-western Australia and Tasmania and larger colonies off New Zealand (Harrison 1983). They spend the non-breeding season in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and apparently tend to avoid warmer tropical

waters preferring the colder ones (Harrison 1983). The Indian Ocean, being warm, is therefore not where this species would be expected to occur. Indeed, there have been no records within the Indian Ocean north of South Africa except for seven records off the United Arab Emirates (Gantlett 2003). These records have prompted speculation that there may be a small passage of Sooty Shearwaters northwards across the Indian Ocean (Harrison 1983), which would likely take them past the East African coast. However, even seven records hardly constitutes evidence of a regular passage and an individual wandering from southern waters would seem to be the most likely explanation for the current record.

Watamu experienced unusually strong and persistent south-easterly winds for a period of two months prior to the corpse being found and some heavy storms in the week prior. It is possible that this bird was caught in a storm at sea eventually being blown ashore by the prevailing wind. We estimate that the corpse was about one week old when found and that it could have been carried c.80–100 kms in this time, putting it at c. 60–80 kms off Mtwapa, or thereabouts, when it died.

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Colin Jackson
Mwamba Bird Observatory & Field Study Centre, A Rocha Kenya, P.O. Box 383, Watamu, 80202, Kenya. Email: colin.jackson@arocha.org
Simon Valle
Via Pizzo Bernina 2, 00141, Rome, Italy

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